

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the Home

WHO IS THE REAL YOU?

In this week's *parshah*, we learn about the *mitzvah* of building a fence around a rooftop, to prevent people from falling. The wording of the *passuk* is thought-provoking, as it seems to suggest that falling is inevitable: "When you build a new home, and you make fencing for the roof, and you shall not have blood upon your home when a person will surely fall from it..."

One explanation for the wording is that falling is indeed inevitable and part of the natural way of the world. However, we are still commanded to take precautions. Embarking on any project, such as getting married and establishing a home, entails spiritual challenges and we are responsible for doing what we can to protect ourselves. Hoping for the best or believing that "nothing bad will happen" regardless of how we behave is irresponsible and unrealistic.

We are commanded to do what we can to protect ourselves and others from falling — both physically and spiritually. Although a certain measure of falling can be seen as inevitable, being aware of the danger and erecting safeguards will *be'ezras Hashem* prevent us from experiencing drastic drops and keep us within the Torah's boundaries.

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Parshas
Ki Seitzei
VOL. 6 | ISSUE 47



Q QUESTION

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thank you so much for all your insightful words on so many different topics. The ideas are tremendously thought-provoking and have helped me improve my relationships.

I have one question that I haven't heard you speak about yet, and I was wondering what you would advise. Many times, especially recently, I find myself thinking that I married the wrong person. My husband and I come from very different backgrounds — his family is much more "frum" than mine. Our personalities are also very different, the things we enjoy are different...

To be blunt, I grew up in a much more open-minded home, and in addition, all my friends are like me — or rather, more like what I used to be. I feel like I'm not "me" anymore, if that makes sense. I understand a woman is supposed to follow her husband's *minhagim* and preferences but sometimes it's just too much. I don't want to be the type of wife who drags my husband down, which is why I have never told him that I feel this way, especially as he's so caring and I know it would hurt him to find out that he's causing me pain, but sometimes I find myself thinking that maybe we're just not meant for each other.

My husband is a really special person and we have two adorable children *ka"h*. But I keep thinking that he deserves way better than me. Don't get me wrong — I understand that Hashem put us together for a reason but sometimes I really doubt I can live like this my whole life. My husband has no idea that I feel this way (although he does know that I cover my sheitel for him and that I wouldn't do that otherwise).

I also find myself thinking back to before we were engaged, to another boy who was suggested for me. He was much more my type, from a family like my own. I chose my husband — I suppose because I was young and idealistic and really believed that I could live a genuinely *ruchniyusdig* life — but I had no idea back then how hard it would be.

I guess it was *bashert*, but what do I do now?! We have a great marriage, though of course we have our share of bumps in the road like any other couple, but we really work together to communicate effectively and we love each other in a deep and meaningful way. I really do love my husband and respect him immensely. I'm just worried that we're too removed from each other's worlds...

So I guess what I'm really asking is how can I work on myself so that these thoughts go away and never come back. They interfere with my daily life and obviously put a stress on my *shalom bayis*. Recently, I listened to your *shiur* on a wife who is light-years away from her husband in *ruchniyus* terms, and I could really relate to much of what you said, but my situation is different because I knew what I was getting into in advance. I thought of speaking to our rav, as we are both close with him, but I'm concerned that it could get back to my husband, and I don't want to hurt him.

I would really appreciate your advice and *chizuk*.

Thank you

A ANSWER

Issues in life generally fall into two categories: those that cannot be helped, which we *accept* with *emunah*, and those that can, and we *work on* with *emunah*. Even when work is required, it is done with the strong *emunah* that the situation was *bashert*, and only once we are secure in this belief do we invest energies in improving things.

A person without *emunah* would approach this question very differently from the way we approach it. As you write, marrying your husband was *bashert*, no matter what difficulties you face along the line. Strengthening your *emunah* in general and your reliance on *hashgachah pratis* particularly will help you to face each challenge with courage and *simchah*.

Furthermore, as *ehrliche Yidden*, we view marriage as a sacred bond, deserving of all our efforts and investments. The secular perspective appears to view marriage as something replaceable, a decision to abandon if it becomes tough or challenging. It's disheartening to witness these beliefs infiltrate the Jewish community, leading to doubts about the value of our efforts. It's not a simple task, but what could be more priceless and valuable than creating a Yiddishe home?

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Everyone needs *chizuk* from time to time, to help them keep in mind the goal they're striving for. Having the goal in mind often makes it easier to address the bumps along the road. What also helps is to identify those bumps clearly and distinguish the genuinely problematic ones from more general challenges that afflict almost all couples.

In your letter, you mention quite a few issues that are causing you difficulty, which can be split into two different groups: the "internal" struggle between you and your husband; and the "external" struggle that results from comparing yourself to others. These are two separate areas. You mention differences in personality, in how "frum" you are, and *minhagim*. You also mention your friends and family, and a *bachur* who was at one point suggested for you. Your feelings in this area aren't necessarily related to your relationship with your husband and it's important to recognize this.

With regard to the "external" category, I would like to point out that wondering, "How might my life have turned out if only..." is itself problematic. As much as people know that it isn't advisable to compare oneself to others, they still find themselves gazing longingly over the fence at the "greener grass" on the other side. I don't know what your life "would have" looked like had you married someone more like your friends or relatives, but it's clearly a waste of time — and worse, harmful — for you to spend time thinking "what if..."

I don't deny that people have different levels of challenge in their lives. Nonetheless, people have the specific challenges that they need for their *neshamos*, and this is an essential part of life. And, even if you think your life would be simpler with a husband more aligned with your family's way of doing things, you must remind yourself that there would be pluses and minuses in that situation, too, perhaps things that you can't even conceive of.

This doesn't mean that you have to resign yourself to the difficulties you are experiencing. The issues you describe are not set in stone and there is definitely room to discuss, make changes, and improve things for everyone. Wherever change is possible, there is no *mitzvah* to struggle or resist improving your situation.

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Let's now turn to the inner aspect of your relationship with your husband — the disparity between your levels of *frumkeit*, as you see it. Here, too, it's important to break things down into specifics rather than combine all your frustrations in such a way that they appear like a mountain. And here, too, it's important to realize that not all differences are problems.

For starters, if you look for aspects of your husband's more "closed" outlook, you may be able to find many ways in which you actually gain from it. It's possible, for instance, that having a more "open-minded" husband would mean that he is on a smartphone for hours each day, or working in an environment that introduces a whole slew of challenges you're currently sheltered from. Start noticing all the things you gain as a wife and mother from having a husband like yours.

Once you've done that, narrow your focus to the few areas that present a challenge to you. You'll probably find that there aren't as many as you thought. Only at this stage can you start looking for solutions — because you only just realized what the real issues are. Solutions might include *hataras nedarim* regarding a specific *chumra* that you accepted upon yourself but are finding too challenging, or some other kind of change that you can discuss with your husband. You may not have to undo or change all that much to become significantly more comfortable and at ease.

I would also encourage you to discuss things with your rav, especially as you mention that you have a good *kesher* with him, which is a great *brachah*. You may certainly ask the rav to keep things private and not reveal anything to your husband. However, it may help for you to involve your husband to a certain extent.

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Based on how you describe your relationship with your husband, I don't see why you'd resist discussing these issues with him. Of course, the way in which you frame things will make a tremendous amount of difference. Certainly you should never suggest to your husband that you think you "married the wrong person." However, you can discuss specific areas where you are finding things hard, and ask him for suggestions. Beginning the conversation with something like, "I wish I could be more *ehrlich* in this area; for now this is difficult for me, and I wish I knew what to do about it," will be more productive than blaming him for holding to higher standards than

you are accustomed to. You write that you respect your husband greatly, and it's important, and probably very helpful too, that he knows you feel this way.

You should feel free to discuss anything on your mind, such as your personality, your "*frumkeit,*" and your interests. While all these can cause friction between couples, having different personalities and interests is such a common problem that it is almost inappropriate to call it a problem at all. It's just a fact of life that two people, a husband and wife, will have different and often clashing personalities and interests. This isn't only due to your differing backgrounds.

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With that said, I think that it's important to stress another idea in order to help you have the right mindset and view your situation in the right perspective.

You mention having been "young and idealistic" when you became engaged to your husband, which is a wonderful thing. Rav Avigdor Miller would say: "Never regret your extremist idealism," and this applies even if we find ourselves "falling" later in life and wondering how we ever could have been in such a lofty place, once upon a time.

Who were you, when you pictured yourself building what you call a "genuinely *ruchniyusdig* life"? You write that you don't feel like yourself anymore, and the implication is that when you were "young and idealistic," that wasn't you at all — *but it was*. In fact, that was the genuine you, the young woman with aspirations and *ruchniyusdige* ambitions, dreaming of building a true Yiddishe home with a husband like the one you chose. It's only the challenges of daily life that try to drag you down and convince you that things would be easier if only... if only...



This period in the year is a very relevant time to focus on this idea. As we approach Rosh Hashanah and the Yom Hadin, we make all kinds of *kabbalos* and resolutions, aiming higher for the next year, seeing ourselves as we might become, and it's a mistake to think that we're aiming to become other than "ourselves." In fact, what we are trying to become is a *more* authentic version of ourselves, unencumbered with all the *narishkeiten* of this world. Even if we encounter difficulties in actualizing that authentic vision, that doesn't mean that we were unrealistic or silly, and it's not reason to give up or to be more "sensible" about what we take on in future.

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Perhaps, the challenges you face can actually be reframed and seen as opportunities to reconnect with that part of you that you remember from the time when you got engaged, that authentic vision of yourself building a frum, "*ruchniyusdig*" home with a husband who shares those ideals. You may still experience difficulties, but remembering that part of growth is *mesirus nefesh*, being *mevater* in some areas in order to make more significant gains in others, will make it easier to confront them.

You describe a warm and deep connection with your husband, as well as the respect and admiration you have for him, and in truth, you have all the ingredients for a wonderful *shalom bayis* and a genuinely happy and *ehrliche* life. When you remind yourself that being connected to Hashem via struggle and effort is part of life, the way life is supposed to be, you will *be'ezras Hashem* find the strength and determination to look at your challenges in a different way and grow from them.

I believe that the day will come when all the efforts you invested and all the trappings of this world that you gave up will be your genuine source of satisfaction — and that you will be grateful at having been given the challenge and the opportunity to become your real self.

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